

The Duxbury Assemblies – A Dancing Tradition

*"...As around and around you go, your spirits
will hit the top and now that we're dancing
who cares if we ever stop..."*

Jerry Herman – Hello Dolly

For over 40 years, groups of 5th and 6th graders in Duxbury have been routinely changing from their playclothes to jackets and ties, dresses and white gloves, and taking to the dance floor to learn everything from the fox trot to the macarena.

While some enter the world of ballroom dancing and social etiquette reluctantly, within several weeks practically all of them are thoroughly enjoying the experience, according to dance instructor Don Mason, long time assistant to Mr. and Mrs. John Nott, who founded the dance classes many years ago.

Known by various names over the decades, including the Sociables and Assemblies, the classes are an important outlet for young people; "a wonderful social education they're not going to get anywhere else," said Mason. This year he will instruct over 100 Duxbury participants assisted by Michelle French, granddaughter of the Notts, who have retired after many years teaching the classes.

Local parent committees assist Mason in coordinating the invitations to Duxbury students, all of whom are

Duxbury Clipper, Wednesday, December 4, 1996

eligible to attend the classes, unlike years ago when invitations were selective.

Chris Colangelo of St. George St., who heads the 6th grade committee, took lessons from Mr. and Mrs. Nott 33 years ago and today her daughter, Rachel, is participating in the classes virtually under the same format.

Asked what differences she notices today, Chris said, "Not many. The kids talk a lot more than we were allowed to, but the dances are basically the same."

Joanne Vercollone of Possum Run, who has served as general chairman of the committees for the past 2 years said, "We don't call it ballroom dancing anymore. It's really a combination of a variety of dancing and social etiquette. We try very hard to include the whole town, both public and private school children. Classes fill up fast and there are always waiting lists."

Ten dance classes are spread over a period from October to March plus 2 special theme dances. In addition to a wide range of dance steps, students are taught how to escort their partners and make introductions to chaperones.

Mason tries to combine structure with fun. Everyone is included and getting a dance partner is insured. For the first time ever in Duxbury, there are more boys signed up for classes than girls this year.

Mason said he covers a wide range of dances including anything from traditional waltzes, foxtrots, jitterbug and square dances, to the Mexican Hat dance, line dancing and the macarena. Ladies choice and elimination dances are still part of the format. Candy prizes are awarded for excellence.

He explains up front what rules of behavior are expected and if certain students deviate from the rules, he speaks to them in an adult way saying, "I don't recall your saying you couldn't handle the rules." Rarely is a student dismissed from the classes, he said.

The dance classes have become big business. Mason spends the week teaching classes to over 800 students in Duxbury, Cohasset, Wellesley, Weston, Acton, Brookline, North Dartmouth, and Providence.

The Notts started classes many years ago in Duxbury, Norwell, Hingham, Beverly, Sudbury, Weston, and Brookline. "The emphasis on manners continues to this day," said Mason.

"In today's society, young people are exposed to so much violence. They really do welcome an environment where social etiquette is expected," he said.

Mason, who lives in Brookline, is a former Arthur Murray School dancer and instructor who had his own ballroom dancing studio in Boston before joining the Notts over 20 years ago as a full time assistant.

He said the Notts, who have retired to the Stuart, FL area, still keep in touch with him and maintain a great interest in the classes.

Mason attributes the popularity and longevity of the classes to the fact that for many people, dancing provides a personal means of communication which allows them to express themselves through rhythmic movement in an environment of fun, relaxation and companionship.

One of the mothers whose son initially was reluctant to join the class told Mason that her once shy 12-year-old danced with every lady at the table at a recent family wedding.

"Many come in as children and leave the classes as young adults," said Mason. "Hopefully, they gain from the experience."



By PAULA MAXWELL